

## Sustainable Agriculture: Information Access Tools

---

### Compiled by:

Mary V. Gold

[Alternative Farming Systems Information Center](#)



**July 2009**

---

On this Page...

### What is Sustainable Agriculture?

Some terms defy definition. “Sustainable agriculture” has become one of them. In such a quickly changing world, can anything be sustainable? What do we want to sustain? How can we implement such a nebulous goal? Is it too late? With the contradictions and questions have come a hard look at our present food production system and thoughtful evaluations of its future. If nothing else, the term “sustainable agriculture” has provided “talking points,” a sense of direction, and an urgency, that has sparked much excitement and innovative thinking in the agricultural world.

The word “sustain,” from the Latin *sustinere* (*sus-*, from below and *tenere*, to hold), to keep in existence or maintain, implies long-term support or permanence. As it pertains to agriculture, sustainable describes farming systems that are “capable of maintaining their productivity and usefulness to society indefinitely. Such systems... must be resource-conserving, socially supportive, commercially competitive, and environmentally sound.” [John Ikerd, as quoted by Richard Duesterhaus in "Sustainability's Promise," *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* (Jan.-Feb. 1990) 45(1): p.4. NAL Call # 56.8 J822]

Sustainable agriculture was addressed by Congress in the 1990 Farm Bill [Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 (FACTA), Public Law 101-624, Title XVI, Subtitle A, Section 1603 (Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1990) NAL Call # KF1692.A31 1990]. Under that law, “the term sustainable agriculture means an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term:

- satisfy human food and fiber needs
- enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends
- make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls
- sustain the economic viability of farm operations
- enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.”

As more parties sign on to the sustainable agriculture effort, perceptions about what defines sustainability in agriculture have multiplied. AFSIC's publication, *Sustainable Agriculture: Definitions and Terms*, <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902.shtml> strives to

illustrate the commonality and some of the controversy that defining such a goal entails, and it includes brief descriptions of the methodologies and practices currently associated with sustainable agriculture.

“In popular literature, sustainable agriculture generally is presented as a new phenomenon. Wes Jackson is credited with the first publication of the expression in his *New Roots for Agriculture* (1980), and the term didn’t emerge in popular usage until the late 1980s.” (“A Brief History of Sustainable Agriculture,” by Fred Kirschenmann, in *The Networker*, vol. 9, no. 2, March 2004.) However, the idea of agricultural sustainability – stewarding the food production resource base for use of future generations – is not a new phenomenon.

### **Learn more:**

- *Sustainable Agriculture: Definitions and Terms*, by Mary V. Gold. AFSIC, 2007  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902.shtml>
  - *Related Terms (Glossary)*  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902terms.shtml>
  - *For Further Reading (Bibliography)*  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902bib.shtml>
  - *For Further Reading, Supplement 2000-2007(Bibliography)*  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902bib07.shtml>
- *Tracing the Evolution of Organic/Sustainable Agriculture: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography*, by Mary V. Gold and Jane Potter Gates. AFSIC, 2007  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/tracing/tracing.shtml>
- *Exploring Sustainability in Agriculture*, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), 2002  
<http://www.sare.org/publications/exploring.htm>
- *What is Sustainable Agriculture?* ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service  
<http://attra.ncat.org/fundamental.html>

[Back to Top](#)

---

What standards are available for sustainable agriculture?

“[C]onsumers are increasingly demanding on the ethical dimension of food quality. This relates to the process of production and trade and its broad impacts on society and the environment. It includes a wide range of social, environmental or cultural issues such as the treatment of workers, a fair return to producers, environmental impacts and animal welfare.” [Value-adding standards in the North American food market: Trade opportunities in certified products for developing countries by Alice Byers and Pascal Liu. (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2008), <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a1585e/a1585e00.htm>, NAL Call no. TP372.6 .B94 2008] Guidelines about what specific practices meet long-term environmental, economic and social goals and constitute sustainable agriculture is still under debate. However, a handful of groups have attempted to develop standards and/or provide certification services based upon their

own guidelines.

Some examples:

- Food Alliance  
<http://www.foodalliance.org/>  
A non-profit organization that has developed sustainable agricultural practices standards and operates a voluntary certification program based on those standards.
- Sustainable Agriculture Standard Development  
Leonardo Academy Inc.  
<http://www.leonardoacademy.org/programs/standards/agstandard/development.html>  
A non-profit organization that is developing an ANSI Standard for Sustainable Agriculture.
- Sustainable Agriculture Standards for Farm Audits  
Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) Secretariat  
[http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/agriculture.cfm?id=standards\\_farms](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/agriculture.cfm?id=standards_farms)  
The Sustainable Agriculture Network Standards or SAN standards are the basis for Rainforest Alliance certification

[Back to Top](#)

Where are the best sustainable agriculture research and information sources?

Databases and other online information portals may contain book and article citations and abstracts, research project descriptions, full-text documents and spreadsheets, organizational contact information, plant and animal production information and/or other kinds of data. The majority provide free online access and downloading.

AFSIC's Guides to Searchable Sites and Databases,  
[http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/nal\\_display/index.php?info\\_center=2&tax\\_level=1&tax\\_subject=288](http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=2&tax_level=1&tax_subject=288),  
guides you to information and links for:

- Primary Research and Literature Databases
- Secondary Research and Literature Databases
- Related Databases
- Selected Glossaries
- Selected Directories
- Finding Additional Specialized Agricultural Databases
- Information about Obtaining Full-text Journal Articles

### **Learn more:**

- *Sustainable Agriculture Automated Database Searches*, by Becky Thompson. AFSIC, 2009.  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/agnic/susagsearch.shtml>  
Conduct automated, real-time, searches of online databases, Web sites and catalogs to

locate current resources on this topic.

- *Where to Find Sustainable Agriculture Research Online*. AFSIC, 2008  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/agric/susagresearch.shtml>
- *Sustainable Agriculture: Top 10 Research Journals*. AFSIC, 2009  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/agric/susagjournals.shtml>
- Related AFSIC bibliographies and research guides  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/pubsindex.shtml#sustainable.shtml>

[Back to Top](#)

---

How can I find sustainable agriculture people and organizations?

People and organizations are essential information sources for sustainable agriculture. Contacting your state or county Cooperative Extension Service is a good place to begin the search for helpful information and contacts at the local level. In addition to general agricultural information, each state Extension office has a designated Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator. Non-profit, farmer and trade organizations may also prove invaluable.

**Learn more:**

- *Sustainable Agriculture Organizations and Information Providers*. AFSIC, 2006  
U.S. national and regional groups involved in research, outreach, advocacy and production expertise.  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/agric/susagorgs.shtml>
- *State Sustainable Agriculture Coordinators*. Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)  
Each coordinator facilitates a statewide training program in sustainable agriculture concepts and systems for field employees. Coordinators also serve as a point of contact for activities and information about sustainable agriculture specific to their states.  
<http://www.sare.org/coreinfo/coordinators.htm>
- *State and National Partners*. National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), USDA  
National directory of state land-grant institutions, experiment stations and Extension Service offices.  
[http://www.nifa.usda.gov/qlinks/partners/state\\_partners.html](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/qlinks/partners/state_partners.html)

[Back to Top](#)

---

Where can I explore educational and career opportunities?

Learning, career and job opportunities related to sustainable agriculture become more numerous every year.

**Learn more:**

- *Educational and Training Opportunities in Sustainable Agriculture*, 19th edition.

Compiled by Becky Thompson, AFSIC, June 2009

Directory of U.S., Canadian and international programs, curricula, classes, distance learning and field days at academic institutions and non-profit organizations.

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/edtr/EDTR2009.shtml>

- *Sustainable Farming Internships and Apprenticeships*. ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, 2007  
Directory of farms seeking interns/apprentices from North America.  
<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/intern.html>
- *For Educators*. Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)  
Educational tools from SARE for those who work with farmers and ranchers.  
<http://www.sare.org/coreinfo/educators.htm>
- *Sustainable Agriculture Resources & Programs for K-12 Youth*. Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), 2006  
<http://www.sare.org/publications/edguide.htm>
- *SANET-MG*. Sustainable Agriculture Network.  
Job opportunities are often listed with the Sustainable Agriculture Network's e-mail discussion group, SANET-MG. To check recent archives/messages, go to <http://lists.sare.org/archives/sanet-mg.html>; Select "Search the archives since July 2000." Use keywords like "position" or "intern" or "internship," or simply browse the past 2 to 3 months worth of messages. You may also subscribe to the list via this site.
- *Organic Volunteers*  
<http://www.organicvolunteers.org/>  
Search and find academic offerings, apprenticeships, internships, jobs and WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) placements.
- *REE Employment Opportunities*. U.S. Department of Agriculture  
<http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/jobs/index.htm>
- *Chronicle Careers: Jobs in Higher Education*. The Chronicle of Higher Education.  
<http://chronicle.com/jobs/>

Other resources may be found at the AFSIC's [Education and Research](#) Web page and through people and organization resources listed above.

[Back to Top](#)

---

Who will fund my sustainable agriculture research project?

*Sustainable Agriculture Research Funding Resources*, AFSIC, March 2007

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/agnic/susagfunding.shtml>

*Federal Resources for Sustainable Farming and Ranching*

ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, 2007

This publication offers an overview of the major federal conservation programs that provide resources for farmers and ranchers to enhance and maintain sustainable farming and ranching practices.

[http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/federal\\_resources.pdf](http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/federal_resources.pdf)

[Back to Top](#)

---

Where can I find sustainable agriculture conferences and workshops?

*Calendars: Sustainable Agriculture, Organic Farming, Alternative/Specialty Crops and Livestock*, AFSIC, 2007

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/agnic/susagevents.shtml>

[Back to Top](#)

---

Last Modified: Wednesday, 14-Oct-2009 15:43:44 EDT

Page printed from:

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/agnic/susag.shtml>